

VZCZCXRO2316
PP RUEHAG RUEHBI RUEHCI RUEHLH RUEHPW RUEHROV
DE RUEHAH #1434/01 3090720
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 040720Z NOV 08
FM AMEMBASSY ASHGABAT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 1798
INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA PRIORITY 4458
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING PRIORITY 2270
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 2135
RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL PRIORITY 2706
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 0920
RHMFISS/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE PRIORITY 3025
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ASHGABAT 001434

SIPDIS

STATE FOR SCA/CEN

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/04/2018

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [SOCI](#) [UN](#) [TX](#)

SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: UNICEF SEEKING BROADER MANDATE FOR
SOCIAL PROGRAMS

Classified By: Charge Sylvia Reed Curran for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: According to the acting representative for UNICEF in Turkmenistan, the organization's current and future program plans focus largely on health and education. The organization has ambitious plans to expand its activities. A good relationship with the government is helping to make it happen. One thing that could stand in the way is the issue of corruption, which overshadows UNICEF's work here as it does pretty much everything else. END SUMMARY.

DRAFT PLAN ENVISIONS A DOUBLING OF EFFORT

¶2. (C) Charge and poloff met on October 31 with UNICEF Acting representative Abdul Alim to discuss the organization's plans for the next few years in Turkmenistan. Alim said that his office is currently preparing a draft program plan for the 2010-2014 timeframe. The organization operates about one million dollars worth of program activities here annually, and would like to expand that to about 1.5 to 3 million dollars per year in the near future.

¶3. (C) Past programs have included social and health related programs such as those that spearheaded the (USAID-funded) iodization of the salt supply and vitamin and iron fortification of flour produced in Turkmenistan. He said these programs have been great successes, and 90 percent of the salt supply is now iodized. Last year, UNICEF began working with the Turkmen government, procuring machinery and teaching the process of flour fortification. UNICEF has also been involved with preventive healthcare programs such as national immunization.

¶4. (C) Alim said the draft program plan envisions an expansion of the immunization program and other areas of preventive healthcare, but UNICEF representatives would also like to start up an early child development program for pre-school-age children. The organization had developed a range of other education and health-related program proposals recently, but Alim said that some of those ideas had been immediately copied by representatives of Europa House after the two groups met not long ago. UNICEF is not going to complain, however, given the EU's growing role as a significant donor.

15. (C) Although childhood mortality statistics have improved for Turkmenistan in the last few years, there is still a need for neo-natal support programs. Alim said that there is little in the way of care for mothers and new babies, and UNICEF is ready to propose programs that put a new focus on this. (COMMENT: A national safe motherhood program exists. USAID is doing training in support of this program. END COMMENT.) Part of the program will also focus on promoting a national nutrition policy. Alim indicated that he will soon be going to Geneva to defend UNICEF's draft program plan.

THE SEARCH FOR AN "AGENT OF CHANGE"

16. (C) He noted that cooperation with Turkmen government representatives has been more rigid and difficult this year than during the previous year. Alim said that the British Ambassador had made a similar observation in terms of the government's willingness to cooperate on social programs. As a result, UNICEF has been searching for a prominent person in Turkmenistan to be an "agent of change" who would advocate for UNICEF and help promote its programs. In the absence of an independent civil society, it has been difficult to find someone.

17. (C) Alim had recently met President Berdimuhamedov's sister at a recent independence holiday event, and was struck with the notion that she might be a possible "agent of change." She was not very distinctive in her appearance, he

ASHGABAT 00001434 002 OF 002

said, but she asked him many questions about how the Turkmen people and Turkmenistan are perceived abroad. She is an etrap administrator somewhere in the Ashgabat area. He said he had probed her a bit, looking for her personal perceptions of UNICEF and its work. He said later he had talked with his local staff about her potential as a supporter of UNICEF, but the staffers advised him not to pursue her, as the risks outweighed the potential benefits when it came to those close to the president.

18. (C) Alim said that he recently had another respected Turkmen citizen who could potentially be an "agent of change" over to his house for dinner. Through a mutual acquaintance, he had met this senior official at the National Archives who is also a recognized national Turkmen poet. The UN has asked him to put together a book of children's poems, and he is considering the request.

CORRUPTION ALWAYS JUST UNDER THE SURFACE

19. (C) UNICEF has been successful in establishing trust among representatives of the Ministry of Education. Alim said he would like to bring in an expert on school curriculum, and wants to promote this idea. He said his staff works with Ministry of Education International Department head Nury Bayramov's deputy on education projects, since the relationship had advanced sufficiently to get UNICEF staff direct access to education ministry personnel rather than via the MFA. That said, Alim noted that they have still had their share of "inconsistencies" in their dealings with the government. He said he wanted to tell his Turkmen interlocutors that inconsistencies in the government's decision making could hold risks and costs, and that this unpredictable behavior could cost the country its access to specific UNICEF programs.

110. (C) Alim said that the president looks favorably on UNICEF, and at the recent opening of a new kindergarten facility in Ruhubulent, Berdimuhamedov turned to Alim and said, "Can you do something like this?" Alim was not sure what the president had in mind, but guessed that his perception was that UNICEF could construct a similar facility more cheaply and efficiently.

¶11. (C) EU-TACIS representative Michael Wilson also recently made observations about misguided government decision making and the growing shadow of corruption. He noted that the "misallocation of state resources" and corruption appeared to be on the rise, which he attributed as a reaction originating in the Soviet period when people went back to what they knew best during hard times. In his opinion, despite the new constitution containing a reference to private education, there is no information anywhere about an actual private education system and a plan for introducing private schools does not appear to exist in the Ministry of Education. Wilson added that "the phenomenon (of corruption) is impossible to stop and the bribes keep rising" for entrance into universities.

¶12. (C) COMMENT: Alim may have been alluding not only to the unpredictable behavior of interlocutors in the way they communicate and make decisions regarding international programs and proposals, but also to the element of corruption which is endemic. Alim's interest in finding an agent of change is admirable. If the president's sister is interested in playing such a role, it would benefit UNICEF and its programs here. END COMMENT.
CURRAN